Introduction

On a brisk, autumn afternoon in October 2009, I walked through the doors of the Royal Festival Hall on London's South Bank. Amidst the bustle of people rushing to performances or sipping coffee and talking, I spotted Margaret in a navy-blue knitted dress with a stack of colourful bracelets encircling her wrist, typing on her laptop at a table.[1] She had suggested meeting there because it is where she often spent Sunday afternoons after attending a Pentecostal church in north London. A mutual Kenyan friend had introduced us. Over the course of our conversation, we discovered that we had attended the same wedding reception a few months earlier and that I visited a Pentecostal church she sometimes attended near her house in Dagenham, East London. We soon began talking about what had brought her to London from Nairobi in 1995.

At the time, Kenya was beset with political instability and economic and social uncertainty. The introduction of multi-party elections in 1992 had destabilised the country, triggering violence and displacement, while the impact of structural adjustment programmes reverberated through the economy and wider society, undermining health and educational systems. As paths to social maturity grew less accessible and routes to achieving or maintaining middle-class lives became more uncertain, worry and struggle displaced hope and a sense of possibility (Frederiksen 2000, 2002; Geissler and Prince 2010; Prince 2006). A growing sense of despair and of loss marked a crisis of social reproduction in Kenya, as well as across much of Africa (Ferguson 1999). With physical and social mobility long intertwined in Kenya, however, migration offered a connection to a world where aspirations could be realised, and livelihoods pursued. And, Britain, a seemingly familiar place from Kenya's history and education system, beckoned.

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[1] The names of my interlocutors have been changed to ensure anonymity. In select instances, additional identifying details, which do not have analytical significance, have also been changed.

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Although economic gain and social possibilities are related, complex social motivations cannot be understood by means of a reductionist economic logic. In sharing her migration story, Margaret explained how she migrated to 'better herself'. She was intent on becoming a particular kind of person, integral to which was obtaining a university degree. At the same time, she wanted to be someone who helped her kin. Having left school at 16 to help her widowed mother support her younger siblings, she imagined the United Kingdom as her opportunity 'to finish her education, get a job, build a house, develop her career, straight, straight', with no further interruptions. Though Margaret's reason for migrating was individually oriented on the face of it, she was not the classic solo migrant, a rational, typically male, actor attempting to maximise economic opportunities, a familiar and enduring figure in migration literature and public imagination. Margaret's migration was a familial project, collectively imagined and financed, though individually undertaken. With money raised through *harambee* gatherings from family, friends, acquaintances, and fellow church members, Margaret had enough money for one year of fees at an A-level college.[2] By the time we met, she was 40 years old, had earned a Bachelor's degree in International Relations, and was studying for a Master's degree, while working as a cleaner.

Speaking about her natal family, she shared how she had helped her cousin Teresa move to London in 2002. She wanted to help Teresa complete her education, just as Teresa's father, Margaret's mother's eldest brother, had done for Margaret by paying her school fees in Nairobi. Not only did she assist Teresa in finding a place in a college and applying for a visa, but she saved the money for Teresa's flight and for the additional expense of having Teresa living with her. 'Everything was fine in the beginning,' Margaret said. 'Teresa was nice and cooperative. But once she learned the system here [in Britain], she decided she wanted to leave, to have her freedom', which meant moving out of Margaret's house. Since then, Teresa had 'gotten messed about', as Margaret put it, 'living with several different boyfriends, having a baby, and raising him on her own, postponing her studies'. Though the cousins

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[2] The practice of coming together to achieve a shared goal or to help another is embodied in the spirit of *harambee* (Swahili for 'all pull together'), which refers to a sense of mutual assistance and responsibility and community self-reliance that President Jomo Kenyatta popularised in the early days of Kenya's independence. *Harambees* are fundraising gatherings that take the form of a party where the organisers host their guests with the expectation that the guests will make financial contributions towards achieving a communal goal, such as building a school or church, hosting a wedding, or supporting a person's migration (see also Chapter 5).

still saw each other now and then, their relationship was strained, as was Margaret's relationship with Teresa's parents. Margaret reflected on what happened with her cousin: 'It's hard to know if someone has other intentions and wants something from you. Teresa used cunning to do what she wanted. She felt entitled to be given.' Margaret went on, 'I just try to carry on and not get pulled off my path.' If Margaret's migration was an expression of a link forged by the shared histories of Kenya and the United Kingdom, Teresa made a similar claim through the idiom of kinship, both intent on pursing projects of self-making that were at once family- and life-making projects.

This book is an ethnography of transnational kinship between Kenya and the United Kingdom and the material, moral, and affective ties and obligations among kin that migration stretches across space. My conversation with Margaret was a familiar one, touching on several themes that emerged during my multi-sited fieldwork among migrants in London and their non-migrant kin in Kenya. Familial situations such as that which transpired between the cousins are not unusual. Part and parcel of being related, they are also about more than interpersonal issues and particular family dynamics. They reflect the entanglement of personal and collective well-being, of individual aspirations and social expectations and obligations within a wider structural context that can both facilitate and frustrate their reconciliation. Rather than focusing on changing modes of economic production, 'push-pull' factors, and globalisation as drivers of familial change and transformation – the kinds of structural explanations demographers, economists, family sociologists, and globalisation theorists favour – *Relative Distance* considers the ways in which large-scale economic, social, and political processes, rather than happening 'out there', play out in explicit and implicit negotiations between people's everyday obligations, aspirations, and expectations, and the decisions and (in)actions they take regarding specific relationships. More specifically, it focuses on the micro-spaces of transnational familial life, revealing how, through quotidian interactions, exchanges, and practices, those who move and those who stay contribute to the ongoing transformation of kinship.

What follows is a study of the making and re-making of transnational families through the statements and practices of those who move and those who stay. Through their stories of migration, migrants narrate the collective imaginings and efforts which propelled them out of Kenya, while ways of staying in touch across space, such as calling, texting, visiting, and remitting, as well as marrying, constitute everyday and ritualised practices of relatedness. Just as these practices connect kin, they also disconnect them. At the same time, the book considers how

ideas of what makes a good kinsperson are the subject of (subtle) negoti-ation within families, between generations and genders, and vis-à-vis Kenyan and British societies. It shows how kin invoke multiple idioms and logics, drawn from (born-again) Christianity and customary trad-ition to define or redefine what being related entails. In doing so, it considers what is at stake for kin in these familial encounters, namely, issues of personhood, recognition, and belonging.

The space that migration opens up between migrant and non-migrant kin is thus not only literal, but also figurative – it is where kin express, negotiate, and transform what being related entails. Transnational kin, especially migrants, must consider whether and how to stay in touch and with whom, and if and how to respond to requests for assistance. In the face of incommensurate demands on their attention, respect, and resources, migrant kin respond situationally and strategically in answering these social, moral, and affective questions. This is not to suggest they are rational, calculating actors, like the classic lone migrant, so much as persons existentially compelled to maintain their sense of self without causing or having to witness their kin struggle or suffer. Accordingly, the book offers an expanded conceptualisation of distance in the study of transnational kinship and migration studies generally. More than geographic and physical, distance for migrant and non-migrant kin is also phenomenological and social. Because life is never static, the interplay between these forms of distance may change; despite both Margaret and Teresa living in London, Margaret felt distant (and kept her distance) from her cousin, though this may change over time. Put simply, distance is relative.

Never solely familial affairs, these negotiations point to the ways in which the 'family' serves as a moral barometer for wider Kenyan and British societies. This book shows that changes in kin relations cannot easily be attributed to the so-called inevitable nuclearisation of families as a consequence of moving to Europe, part of the teleological narrative of modernisation more generally. Instead, it demonstrates how kin navigate their respective circumstances, reconfiguring the meaning of relatedness as they do so and, at the same time, how local, national, and global forces mediate the social reproduction of families. Transnational families thus offer a privileged lens for considering how people make sense of wider social transformations.

Issues of social reproduction not only affect the lives of individual families, but also the future of the wider societies in which they live. Solutions for addressing numerous contemporary issues, for example, caring for ageing populations in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe, have been found in and through migration. These

entanglements of economies and lives, the entwining of processes of social reproduction across nation-states, however, are not new; rather, they have long histories, despite the reluctance of former metropoles to acknowledge shared pasts and intertwined futures. Just as in families, generational interdependencies within societies and between societies highlight not only the material and social stakes, but also the moral and existential ones, entailed in the question, who is responsible for whom?

Moral Economies of Transnational Kinship

If families, rather than the act of migration, are taken as the departure point, migration projects like those at the heart of this book can be understood as domains of interaction between those who move and those who stay, projects also irrevocably shaped by the wider socio-legal, political-economic, and historical contexts in which they take shape. Migration stretches kinship relations across space, forging a transnational social field infused with socio-cultural norms, values, and expectations; these in turn constitute shared frames of reference, as well as the basis of normative pressures (Carling 2008). It is in and through family members' statements, practices, and exchanges that bonds of relatedness are expressed and sustained, reproduced and transformed, attenuated and deepened (Carsten 2000). Kinship obligations and the accompanying tensions and dilemmas, which can emerge in trying to fulfil them, are not specific to transnational families. Yet, migration adds new dimensions of complexity. As Michael Jackson has commented, it is 'the impossibility of calculating what one may lose in leaving a settled life or homeplace and what one may gain by risking oneself in an alien environment, the difficulty striking a balance between personal fulfilment and the moral claims of kinship' (2012: 194). The forms of communication, the substance of exchanges, and the felt emotions that interactions, whether in person or virtually, generate are then integral to understanding transnational kinship.

I develop a framework of moral economies of transnational kinship to conceptualise the continuous argument among migrants and their kin living between the United Kingdom and Kenya about what being related entails.[3] In the name of kinship, family members make moral demands

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[3] Mindful of the long and varied history of 'moral economy', my usage of the term resonates most closely with John Lonsdale's (1992b, 1996) conceptualisation of debates among Kikuyu-speaking people in Kenya during the colonial era about if and how to meet social demands, balancing collective responsibility, authority, and honour in the handling of unequal obligations (see Chapter 1). Also relevant here is Fassin's definition of the

on each other, on one another's autonomy and resources, marking the entanglement of affection and obligation. Those engaged in arguments about moral responsibility and unequal obligations debate if and how to meet those demands. This socially negotiated process has consequences for all those involved in that it shapes social interactions and the ability of kin to garner material and social resources in the future. My use of moral economy thus foregrounds contestation, argument, and debate, departing from how it is often understood in the context of families and households where cooperation and a communitarian ethos are generally emphasised.

At the core of these moral economies is the notion of obligation, which, as understood here, is closely tied to morality. In anthropology, following Durkheim, the moral has often been equated with the social, whereby adherence to rules and norms is important for maintaining the social order. In contrast, Harri Englund (2008) underscores the 'materiality of morality' and its link to obligation in a way that provides helpful stimulus for the development of this moral economies framework. Turning to Max Gluckman, who saw 'moral obligation … [as] inseparable from the material and affective practices that constitute persons', Englund posits the 'existential compulsion at the heart of moral obligation', suggesting that 'it is constitutive of, rather than external to, those who give and receive' (2008: 34, 36). Thus, the material and the affective not only co-constitute kinship, but also persons. Accordingly, obligation is understood as relational, rather than individual, as intersubjective, not subjective, and as integral to personhood. Without denying the ways in which obligations can be burdensome or corrosive for relations, this understanding opens up analytical space to consider what is at stake for transnational kin as they relate across space.

This book's framework illuminates more fully several aspects of geographically dispersed families and their lives. Transnational family research often examines the negotiations of families vis-à-vis state (im)migration regimes, reflecting the interest in migration studies in the interplay of structure and agency. Because the starting point for much of this research is the migration of individuals understood as economic or labour migrants, the role of governments in regulating migrants' rights of residence, work, family reunification, and mobility is central to their analyses. Migration regimes generally make it difficult for families to reunify in the countries where migrants work and, thus,

concept as referring to the 'production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions, and values and norms and obligations in social space' (2009: 13).

constrain how they sustain a sense of relatedness (Boehm 2012; Coe 2014; Dreby 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; McKay 2012; Parreñas 2001, 2005). For example, the visa fees a migrant worker must pay for bringing a spouse and/or each child to Britain, payable for the duration of the visa, are prohibitively high and continue to rise, putting this kind of family migration out of reach of many migrants, except those taking up high-paying positions (Vassiliou 2020). Such encounters with so-called receiving states produce very real material and affective consequences, in many cases, separating families and hindering their ability to see one another.

However, as I was to learn over the course of fieldwork, legal restrictions and other structural constraints did not feature in how my migrant interlocutors talked about their familial relations and obligations nor in how their attempts to maintain and fulfil them were thwarted or facilitated. This, I argue, is because such factors, reasons, and rationales are not part of culturally intelligible and affectively meaningful discourses and practices through which relatedness is expressed and negotiated. This is not to say that such issues are irrelevant to their lives – far from it – but rather to foreground the socio-moral imperatives and emotional compulsions of kinship, regardless of the effects of state power.

Relative Distance is part of a theoretical move in the study of intimate migration and transnational families to consider not only the ways kin maintain a sense of 'familyhood' across space (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002: 3), but also the tensions, arguments, suspicions, and distrust that can occur within families or, in other words, the 'dark side' of kinship (Geschiere 2013; for examples of transnational African families, see Adrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020; Cole and Groes-Green 2016; Hannaford 2018). The moral economies framework helps to illuminate how cooperation and conflict, reciprocity and responsibility, are integral to kinship, along with feelings of love and longing, envy and frustration, humiliation and shame. Although arguments and tensions may fray and undermine bonds of kinship, they are also expressions of relatedness. While much existing literature foregrounds transnational couples or transnational parents (especially mothers) of young children, I consider a wider set of kinship relations through the experiences of two generations of Kenyans (see 'Generations and Migration'); along with conjugal and parent-child relations, these include those between siblings, among extended kin, and intra-generational relations. Given the historical predominance of extended, multi-generational families in Kenya, which have been integral to individual and collective well-being, it is valuable to explore the dynamics of these intra-familial transnational relations if we are to understand how migration contributes to the reworking of kinship.

Although migration is construed across diverse ethnographic contexts as positive in many ways, it is not unambiguously seen in a favourable light. Scholars of transnational families describe the moral discourses about migrants and the (negative) impacts of migration in familial and public conversations. For example, despite the valuable income remittances provide to national economies, women migrants may be labelled 'bad mothers' for leaving their children at home, and migration blamed for creating 'broken families' (Chamberlain 1999; Erel 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005). Such gendered stigmatisations are not salient in Kenya or elsewhere in Africa where women's mobility internally and internationally is understood as a socially acceptable way of ensuring familial well-being, even if women have not historically been as mobile as men in Kenya (Nelson 1992; see also Åkesson 2004; Coe 2011, 2014; Drotbohm 2009). Instead, in my fieldwork, migrant kin were accused of 'forgetting where they come from', for example, when they did not call, remit, or visit enough, with the notion of change emerging as socially, morally, and affectively fraught (see Chapters 4 and 6).

In making sense of these characterisations and accusations, this framework examines how migrant and non-migrant kin draw on culturally intelligible, though not uncontested, discourses, values, and logics related to born-again Christianity and customary tradition in familial negotiations. Similar to Lonsdale's understanding of moral economy in which whoever identified with the moral issues under debate was considered part of the ensuing discussions, this framework is grounded in transnational kin's understanding that staying in touch via calls, text messages, and visits were expressions of love, care, respect, and loyalty, and that requests for financial or migration support could be made of kin (2003: 19). I argue that, rather than trying to break bonds of kinship, non-migrant accusations were attempts to implicate migrant kin in these moral economies and have their own material, symbolic, and affective needs met. Meanwhile, migrants felt obliged to those in Kenya because it was fundamental to how they saw themselves, as well as to how others perceived them, and to their own sense of belonging. Thus, for migrants, how to balance individual striving and collective social concerns when considering how often and to whom to give, call, or visit, and how not to compromise one's moral standing in transnational interactions became crucial questions.

Despite the growth of the Kenyan economy since Margaret's migration in the mid-1990s, the status of the middle class remains precarious and poverty persistent, which means kin continue to be important sources of material support. And, despite historical transformations of

practices of familial reciprocity in Kenya since the colonial era, a normative expectation of helping one's kin remains morally potent. In other words, kinship obligations and requests for support do not cease, whether it is one year or many years after migration. By looking closely at sources of tension, differences in viewpoints, the substance of disagreements, and the ways in which they were resolved or not, we can understand more fully how transnational kin make sense of changes they experience, as well as how they generate changes in kin configurations and in the meaning of kinship more generally.

At the same time, the kinds of familial situations and dilemmas discussed here evade capture by sociological analysis because there is inevitably a tension between external conditions and interpreting subjectivities. While migrant and non-migrant kin may reflect their socio-historical positioning as gendered, aged subjects, their lives ineluctably exceed these categories, making it impossible to infer their lived experience from their identities or from specific historical moments. This book is then a situated study of kinship – how do particular kin and families experience macro-scale phenomena in their everyday lives? To capture the social, moral, and affective complexity of transnational kinship, I share Michael Jackson's call to include biography with ethnography in studies of migration (2012: 198; see 'Dwelling in families'), while also privileging mundane interactions and events. Such a phenomenological approach, which is at once attendant to political and socio-economic conditions, is novel in studies of geographically dispersed families and helps to illuminate the existential issues that generational interdependencies raise not only among kin, but also for societies.

The Phenomenology of Transnational Kinship: Conceptualising Distance

If distance is understood primarily as geographic and physical, as it typically is in migration research (see, for example, Carling 2008; de Haas 2010; Portes et al. 1999), then the initial challenge transnational families face is the experience of geographic dispersion and the need to navigate physical separation. In today's world of mobile phones, WhatsApp, Skype, and social media, keeping in touch has never been easier, faster, or cheaper. The ability of communication technologies to approximate a sense of co-presence by enabling kin to hear one another's voice or see their faces on a screen is remarkable (Baldassar 2007, 2008; Hannaford 2015, 2018; Lindley 2010; Madianou and Miller 2012). Video calls allow one to feel as though they know what it is like where

their loved one lives, even if they have never been there themselves. In doing so, communication technology fosters a sense of 'being there'.

Remarkable as they are, there is a downside to communication technologies, as scholars have noted more recently. Being instantly and constantly available can fuel suspicion and jealousy in transnational marriages (see, for example, Cole 2014; Hannaford 2018) or leave migrants feeling hounded by demands for assistance (see Chapter 4). As I was to learn during fieldwork, such contact can also be poignant, painfully so for a grandmother hearing her monolingual grandson who she had not (yet) met speaking English with an accent she associated with the British colonial officers of her childhood. Although the geographic distance remains unchanged, calls amplify the felt sense of distance. While Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller's notion of simultaneity – that is, 'living lives that incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located in a destination country and transnationally' (2004: 1003) – has been instrumental in advancing analyses of transnational lives as a single social field that span national borders, the nuances of what simultaneity means for lived experience have not been fully theorised.

The notion of simultaneity also raises issues of time and temporality. Although migration research has long privileged the spatial, temporal matters are important for a phenomenological understanding of transnational kin dynamics. By the time I travelled to Kenya in 2010 to meet the husbands, siblings, parents, children, and cousins of those I knew in London, it had been, in many cases, more than a decade since my migrant interlocutors first left. While older women migrants expected 'to be here a few years', younger migrants wanted to 'become someone', self-making projects without delimited timeframes. No one I met anticipated staying in London as long as they had. Although many had visited Kenya in the intervening years, though generally not as often as every year, several had yet to return for a visit. In any case, much had happened in the lives of those who moved and those who stayed, a myriad of happy and sad occasions, successes and failures, big and small, significant and mundane; much had also changed in Kenya and in London.

Both policy and public discourses regarding migration often assume the classic migrant, that rational, calculating actor, has clear intentions and plans. Yet, such discourses ignore the contingency of life, the inevitability of unanticipated events and encounters, not to mention unforeseeable consequences. To be sure, those I met had plans – as one acquaintance put it, 'you come to work or study', before quickly adding 'but then life happens'. And, while migrants had sought change in migrating – a change in circumstances, as well as in fortunes – neither